St. Chrysostom

THE CHURCH IN THE CITY:

WEEPING TEARS OF GRIEF AND HOPE

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There was something about his voice. It came through the intercom of the Manse next to the church, urgently, painfully. When you work in a city church you hear, before very long, every conceivable story created, rehearsed, told and retold in order to separate you from a few dollars. I have wondered at times about the general health of the people in Tennessee, because every day someone asks us for money in order to buy a bus ticket to visit a mother who is critically ill in Nashville. And so one devises some criteria to separate the wheat from the chaff. One learns to inhale deeply and recognize the distinct and telltale smell of alcohol. And we devise ways to separate real from fabricated human need. Meal ticket vouchers, food and clothing instead of cash is one way to make sure one's charity is not ending up in the cash register of a local liquor store. But even that can be tricky if what you give is in any way marketable. And so, in the process of protecting our charity, being responsible with our resources, assuring that our caring is deserved, something sometimes gets lost.

This voice penetrated my own defense perimeters. I went to the door and saw a young man in torn and dirty clothing. His face was bruised and puffy, and he was shivering. It was not particularly cold. He did not ask for money or food. All he wanted was a sweater so he could stop shivering. So I did what we all know we should do under those circumstances. I referred him to our Social Service Center around the corner and returned to the game on television. Just as I sat back down I recalled two things: one, it was 5:30 p.m., and the Social Service Center closes at 5:00 p.m. on Saturday; and two, a wedding was about to begin in the chapel. So I hurried over to the church and sure enough, there he was, standing at the side door near the chapel, the one that is locked, pounding, trying to look through the windows. Inside there were people in tuxedos and lovely dresses engaged in a very important and very happy religious ceremony.

The church staff was caught between the two events: the lovely wedding about to begin and the man standing outside the door, with his face all puffy and bruised, shivering, wanting a

sweater. The resolution was simple enough. The receptionist and I went down to the Share Shop, found a sweater and a wool sport coat. I took them up to the man and gave them to him. He was overjoyed, put them both on, thanked me profusely and walked up Chestnut Street.

As I watched him make his way through the small cafe tables outside Cricket's, a four-star restaurant immediately west of the church, full of fashionable people with shopping bags from Bloomingdale's, Marshall Field's, Lord & Taylor, enjoying a late afternoon drink, I felt guilt, exasperation, anger, frustration. The church can't interrupt a wedding every time a homeless person or an addict or a drunk looking for some guilt-ridden, middle class bleeding heart to finance another bottle of Muscatel pounds on the door. Nor can I play savior to every person with a hand out on Michigan Avenue, not to mention the ten or fifty thousand homeless people on the streets, depending on whose numbers you believe, not to mention millions of hungry people in the country and world. So I watched him walk away from the church, where the processional had now begun, with his discarded wool sweater and sport coat, threading his way through the cocktail crowd at Cricket's - still shivering by the way - and I found myself wondering.

Urban ministry is like that. The city is like that. It's one of the reasons suburban people seem to dislike the city so much and treat you like you have some kind of mental illness if you say something so ludicrous as "I love cities," which I do, always have, always will. But I do not love the city sentimentally - no longer.

Harvey Cox has written the forward to a fine new collection of essays that should be must reading for all of us, Envisioning The New City: A Reader on Urban Ministry.

Cox, who has spent his career in cities, he says, has been mugged in Chicago, burglarized in Boston, nearly asphyxiated in Mexico City, interrogated in Berlin and hopelessly lost in Tokyo, still loves the city. Cox says the view of Los Angeles from a jet approaching the airport at dusk can be electrifying. Millions of lights blink and move, stretching out in every direction to create an urban icon whose sheer scope and scale can take the breath away. It is a sight no human being living in any previous century could have imagined. But once you're on the ground, the aesthetic thrill quickly dissipates.

Cox quotes the German playwright, Berthold Brecht, who remarked that while Shelley thought hell was a place rather like London, in his own opinion it was probably much more like Los Angeles. [p. 13]

The city as hell. In that same book, Jim Wallis tells about his sister and her five-year-old son Michael, walking through their Washington, D.C. neighborhood on the way to the Sojourners Day Care Center, where burned out buildings and vacant lots remain from the 1968 riots. "Riot Corridor," it is still called. Michael looked at his mother and said, "Mommy, was there a war here?" [p. 44]

Urban problems have reached gargantuan proportions. Columnist William Raspberry wrote recently that the problem of homeless poor people is so complex, so multi-layered, so multi-faceted, so hopeless that he has noticed his own capacity to care shutting down. It's called "Compassion Fatigue."

You know the litany: city schools are bad, public housing is awful, gang violence, drugs, social destruction, family disintegration.

Jesus wept over the city. When the city came into view on that powerful day when he entered it, in a procession of palm waving supporters, he saw it and wept.

This is a lament which the Biblical scholars define as "a voice of love and profound caring, a vision of what could have been and of grief over its loss, of personal responsibility and frustration of sorrow and anger mixed." [Luke, Interpretation, Fred Craddock, p. 229]

And he says:

> "If you only knew the things that make for peace. But they are hidden from your eyes. The day will come when your enemies will crush you."

And then, of course, he went straight to the Temple, and what he did there was very significant. He didn't say prayers or make a sacrifice. He became angry at the corruption of the sacrificial system and he physically ejected the profiteers. And then he sat down to teach and heal and listen and encourage all the sorts of people who ordinarily weren't allowed in the Temple. It was an act, John Dominic Crossan says, that guaranteed his execution. [See John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus XII.]

There is a lot going on here. There is, first of all, the simple fact that he came to the city. I discovered an absolutely delightful detail in John Dominic Crossan's new book, The Historical Jesus. Crossan says there was a superstition among the rural peasants of Galilee in the first century that "the most powerful demons are not found in small villages but in certain cities." Professor Crossan suggests that when Jesus exorcised a demon, the people might have concluded that the demon headed for Jerusalem.

Not a bad metaphor, actually. I know people who think like that. In fact the thought occurs to me, as I ponder a rush hour trip to O'Hare Airport, that some very real demons have found their way to our city recently. I understand you have a few demons of your own - something about bridges!

He came to the city. He wept because the city was blind. What is it we see and hear when we look at the city - the energy, the wonderful diversity of ethnic enclaves, languages and music, the symphony, jazz, the Purdue Band, church choirs, laughing children, busy traffic. But there are other voices - voices which, if you have the courage to hear, will make you weep.

Listen to Pharoah and Lafeyette Rivers, aged ten and thirteen, for instance, the boys in Alex Kotlowitz's <u>There Are No Children Here</u> about life in a Chicago public housing project. Bird Leg, their friend, fifteen, is dead, shot on a playground on a hot August night by a rival gang member. At the funeral Pharoah and Lafeyette are sitting in a pew with their family. Someone sang, "Lean On Me."

> "Large tears slid down Pharoah's plump cheeks. He clutched his rolled-up sweatshirt to his chest for security.
>
> "As the service closed and the mourners moved forward to pass the casket, Pharoah, still gripping his balled-up sweatshirt, asked Lafeyette, 'What's up in heaven? Do they have stores?'
>
> 'Shut up,' Lafeyette said. 'You don't know what you're talking about.'
>
> "As the boys waited to file out, they heard a mother, two rows back, scold her son, 'That could have been you if I'd let you go over there.'
>
> "'We're gonna die one way or the other by killing or plain out,' James said to Lafeyette. 'I jus' wanna die plain out.' Lafeyette nodded. 'Me too.'" [p. 48-51]

Just last Tuesday morning first grader Dantrell Davis was shot as his mother walked him to school in the Cabrini Green housing complex, a mile from Fourth Presbyterian Church - the third child in the Jenner Elementary School to be slain since March.

Since the book was published - Dantrell Davis was shot at

Yes

children have been dropped from windows.. beaten & burned & we are on our way to a record # of murders.

Or hear the voice of Nikkeye, who is seventeen and lives in Camden, New Jersey and has been a prostitute since she was thirteen. Time featured Camden in its January 20, 1992 issue in an article entitled "Who Could Live Here?" Camden, a once thriving industrial center, is a gutted, flattened city of 100,000, half of them under twenty-one, with 200 liquor stores, no theaters, where you can buy a hand grenade for $400 on the street and where infants die at twice the natural average, which means at the Third World rate or worse. Nikkeye, told Time:

> "I been stabbed, raped, stomped, kidnapped and beaten up. The only thing that's never happened to me is I never died. I figure I know every thing there is to know. I probably know more than the President. I don't know how to ride a bike. I've never been to a zoo."

The first thing - and perhaps the most important thing - is that Jesus came to the city and loved it enough to know its promise, and enough to hope for its future, loved it enough to weep over it. And so, it seems to me, that is the least we can do - thrill at the glory of the city, its beauty, its strength, its grace and its hope, and if necessary weep at its despair and tragedy.

There is in our cities a lethal combination of forces which is creating an urban problem so large we can no longer even see the entire picture: poverty, drugs, violence, crack, despair, gangs, assault rifles. And beneath it all, what appears for all the world like a massive, unconditional political surrender, the Federal Government hands urban problems to the state. States are notoriously broke, and so they hand them to the city itself. At all three levels people get elected by promising to cut spending and never raise taxes, by looking to the private sector, which responds with some justification that its primary business is business - commerce - not urban violence, education and health care.

Which leaves the churches. We have refused to think in new ways about drugs and gangs and guns. There are not enough police, not enough courtrooms, not enough jails to begin to win the vaunted war on drugs we declared and have already lost. Because of poverty, despair, and drugs, an enterprising child in Cabrini-Green will look out at the world and make some basic decisions. An eight year old "watcher" on a bicycle, keeping a lookout for police, earns $50 a day. A twelve year old can earn twice that much making a few deliveries.

We could, of course, do it better. We know the things that make for peace. We could be better. We could build a city that cares for its least, that shelters its homeless, that tends to its sick and educates its children. But it will require a new

way of thinking. And it will require sacrifice and money, and toughness and vigilance on the part of people and organizations like this one who with one hand feed the poor and the other knock on the door of the politician to talk about a better world.

And the other thing is that by coming to the city, Jesus showed where religion is to be focused. A recent research project of the Center for Ethics and Corporate Policy revealed that for most people in mainline churches religious faith affects family life but has very little to do with the either their work or politics or their leisure.

Professor Glenn Tinder wrote about it in The Political Meaning of Christianity, and observed similarly that we want to keep spirituality separate from the more complex areas of our lives:

> "We are so used to thinking of spirituality as withdrawal from the world and human affairs that think of it as political. Spirituality is personal and private, we assume, while politics is public. But such a dichotomy drastically diminishes spirituality." Tinder says, "the notion that we can be related to God and not to the world - that we can practice a spirituality that is not political - is in conflict with the Christian understanding of God."

Our Lord came to the city - not the retreat center, monastery or cloister, but the noisy, wonderful, tragic, glorious heart of the city.

Somewhere in each of us, I suppose, is a wish that he hadn't done that; a desire to keep our God safely transcendent, to keep our Lord in the pleasant, rolling hills of Galilee, to keep our own religion confined to the church sanctuary on Sunday morning. And that might be a tenable position to assume, except for the fact that he rode into the city. - Pentecost -

In that sense it's bad news, I suppose. But, as is often the case with religion, it is also the good news because it means that God's commitment to us is absolute, and God's coming into the center of our lives is relentless and determined and strong. There is on that road down from the Mount of Olives to Jerusalem not only despair but great hope. There is in his weeping both grief and also deep love for the city. And there is in the whole gesture a promise that Jesus Christ comes to the city, our city, redemptively, decisively, creatively, hopefully.

In Harvey Cox's forward which I cited earlier, he says that what moves him most about the church in the city is its hopefulness. Not superficial optimism, but hope based on the experience

which the church has that the people of God are still alive in the city - people who know a Christ who walks the city streets.

There are tears of grief and hope because of you and this enterprise which for twenty years has kept alive the deep, unquenchable hope that God's redemptive, healing love is among us to bring about a new creation.

insert (2)

It is his incredible love that gives us courage to care, to want the world to be better, to work for peace and justice.

Did you ever notice the words his disciples chant along the road:

> "Blessed is the king...
> Peace in heaven,
> and glory in the highest heaven!"

Those words are strikingly similar to words the angels sang at his birth:

> "Glory to God in the highest heaven and on
> earth peace."

It is what he is about. And it is what we must be about.

Glory to God among us.

Glory to God for showing us how to love.

Glory to him for showing us how to live courageously and die faithfully.

And peace - here - in this city, in your heart and mine.

> "Blessed is the king
> who comes in the name of the Lord!"

new conclusion